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ABSTRACT

Differences in definitions (and underlying concepts) of "language-minority children at risk" and how these differences affect the results of research on the numbers needing special services are examined in this document. Citing the 1974 Amendments to the Bilingual Education Act as the beginning of a Federal effort to estimate the numbers and particular needs of students lacking in English proficiency, the paper focuses on four subsequent surveys: the 1976 Survey of Income and Education; the 1978 Children's English and Services Study; the 1980 Census; and the 1982 English Language Proficiency Study (ELPS). Discussion centers on the studies' varying notions concerning the impact of mother tongue, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status on a child's ability to learn a second language. In general, language background and usage are imperfectly related to English language proficiency. To assure that the needs of all limited-English-proficient language-minority children are met, definitions which are not restricted by concepts of language dominance or usage, and methods of identification which are not limited to the examination of English-speaking skills, must be used. The ELPS offers a new and powerful tool to update the estimates of the number of language minority children. The paper concludes with a list of sources of additional information. (KH)

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LANGUAGE MINORITY CHILDREN AT RISK IN AMERICA: CONCEPTS, DEFINITIONS AND ESTIMATES

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LANGUAGE MINORITY CHILDREN AT RISK IN AMERICA: CONCEPTS, DEFINITIONS AND ESTIMATES

-- Dorothy Waggoner, Ph.D.

I. INTRODUCTION

Children from homes in which non-English languages are spoken have always attended schools in the United States. Some of them, even those with little initial understanding of English, have succeeded in school programs designed for English-speaking majority children. Others have failed. They have fallen behind or dropped out. They have left school without the English language skills or the basic educational preparation needed to achieve their full potential in English-speaking mainstream society. The plight of these children began to receive national attention in the mid-1960's with the rise of concern for equal educational opportunity. However, the number of language-minority children at risk was unknown. There was little general understanding of the characteristics which put these children at risk. There was little understanding of which characteristics were important in designing appropriate programs for them. There was no consensus on the means to be used to identify groups of individual children, either to determine the extent of need for special programs or to assign individual students to special programs and services.

The need for estimates of the number of language-minority children at risk in the United States became urgent in 1974. At the same time, the need for a better understanding of the issues involved in their identification and of the characteristics which were important in planning programs for them also became critical. At the beginning of 1974 the Supreme Court held, in Lau v. Nichols, that as a matter of civil rights, school districts must provide special programs for children who do not understand English. If school districts were required to

serve certain children, it was necessary to know who they were and how they should be served. It was necessary to know how many children had to be served.

The Bilingual Education Act, passed in 1968, was perceived as the major source of Federal assistance for school districts fulfilling their obligations to language-minority children. The number of children in need of special programs, such as bilingual education, was important in determining the level of Bilingual Education Act appropriations. Accordingly, the 1974 amendments to the Bilingual Education Act contained a mandate to count the number of language-minority children with limited-English speaking ability in the United States. They also authorized funds for studies of the language-minority population.

The 1974 amendments marked the beginning of the Federal effort to obtain better information about language minorities in the United States. The ten years since 1974 have produced the following:

- Counts of the number of language-minority children and adults in the United States and, for the first time, information on their current language exposure and usage from the 1976 Survey of Income and Education (SIE).

- Estimates of the number of limited-English proficient language-minority children based upon testing of these children in their homes with an instrument especially devised for this purpose from the 1978 Children's English and Services Study (CESS).

- Recognition in the 1978 amendments to the Bilingual Education Act that children need proficiency in reading and writing, as well as speaking and understanding English, if they are to succeed in school programs designed for English-speaking majority children. The amendments changed the definition of the Bilingual Education Act target group from children with limited-English speaking ability to children with limited-English proficiency. The CESS estimates conform to this definition.

- A question on current language usage at home and, for those reporting a non-English language, a question on English-speaking ability, for the first time in a decennial census in 1980.

- The English Language Proficiency Study (ELPS) in 1982, applying the test used in the CESS to a sample of children identified in the 1980 Census. Findings from this study will be used to update the estimates of limited-English proficient language-minority children. They can be applied to the 1980

Census data base to obtain estimates for each state, metropolitan area and smaller geographic area, such as a school district, and for major language-minority groups in addition to the group with Spanish language backgrounds.

This paper examines various definitions and their underlying concepts of language-minority children at risk. It analyzes their implications for the size of the population, using illustrations from the 1980 Census and other national data sources. It suggests that those who are concerned about the education of language-minority children should recognize that different estimates embody different concepts of which children must be served and which might benefit from certain special programs. It urges the adoption of inclusive definitions and means of identification to assure that all language-minority children with language-related needs have an equal educational opportunity.

II. DEFINITIONS OF LANGUAGE- MINORITY CHILDREN AT RISK

Almost all definitions of language-minority children at risk contain at least two separate concepts. One of these is the idea of a language background other than English. Language-minority children typically learn English as their second language. Their problems acquiring the requisite English language skills are different from those children whose first and only language is English. The other concept contained in the definitions is the idea of some kind of limitation in English, sometimes relative to proficiency or usage of the home language and sometimes explicitly linked to the school environment. The original Bilingual Education Act definition implied that the two concepts of language background and limited English were synonymous. Children with limited-English speaking ability were defined as children from non-English dominant environments. However, the definitions used by the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights (the office with responsibility for Lau enforcement), the definitions in the 1974 and 1978 amendments to the Bilingual Education Act, and most definitions in state legislation include these two concepts as separate characteristics of the children

who need special assistance to succeed in school programs conducted in English. Both are necessary. Not all children with non-English language backgrounds have difficulty with English and need special programs to succeed in school. Some children with only English in their family backgrounds lack proficiency in school-related English skills, but programs designed for children learning English as their second language are not appropriate for them.

III. NON-ENGLISH LANGUAGE BACKGROUND OR LANGUAGE-MINORITY STATUS

Language background or language-minority status implies language, not ethnicity. A non-English language background is not the same as Hispanic, Asian or other non-majority ethnicity, although many Hispanics, Asians and other ethnic minority people also have non-English language backgrounds. Ethnicity, thus, has sometimes been used as a surrogate indicator of language-minority status in lieu of language data. Language information is readily obtained from the responses to questions in censuses or household surveys, provided the respondent can read the survey or communicate with the interviewer. The traditional indicator of language-minority status in U.S. decennial censuses was the mother tongue question: what language was spoken in this person's home when he or she was a child? The mother tongue question was asked for the entire population in 1940 and again in 1970. A total of 33.7 million people claimed non-English mother tongues in 1970. About 5 million of these were children, aged five to 18. The largest group consisted of people with Spanish mother tongues--7.9 million. Two and a half million of them were children.

In the SIE and the CESS, individuals were considered to have non-English language backgrounds if a non-English language was spoken in their homes either as the usual language or the second language. In the SIE, adults were also considered to have non-English language backgrounds if their mother tongues were other than English,

even though they presently lived in households in which only English was spoken and they no longer spoke their mother tongues. About 28 million people in the United States in 1976 had non-English language backgrounds, according to the SIE. Five million of them were children aged six to 18. The Spanish language group was an even greater proportion of the total than in 1970. About 10.6 million people had Spanish language backgrounds, of whom three million were school-age children.

The 1980 Census asked about the language spoken at home by each individual in a household. In 1980, there were 34.7 million people living in households in which one or more residents spoke a language other than English at home and another 600,000 living in group quarters who spoke non-English languages at home. About 8.1 million of these people were children, aged five through 17. Nearly 16 million of the total population in language-minority households in 1980 were people living in households in which Spanish was spoken, and 4.3 million of them were school-age children.

The 1980 estimate of the number of children in households in which languages other than English were spoken in 1980 corresponds to the estimate of the number of language-minority children from the SIE. The 1980 estimate of the number of adults does not correspond to the SIE estimate because it does not include adults with non-English mother tongues who lived in all-English environments and no longer spoke their mother tongues. This number cannot be estimated from the 1980 Census.

The 1980 estimates are based upon the recombination by household of the responses of individuals to the question about whether they speak languages other than English or only English at home. However, preliminary findings from the ELPS indicate that estimates of language minorities using this procedure are not necessarily the same as estimates based upon responses to questions about whether a language other than English is usually or often spoken in the household. The ELPS contained both the SIE/CESS household language questions and the 1980 Census

individual language question. In the ELPS, there were nearly 1.5 million fewer children, aged five to 17, in households in which a non-English language was reported to be the language usually or often spoken than in households in which one or more individuals were reported to speak a language other than English at home.

In the surveys to meet the mandate, the definition of non-English language background was made as broad as possible in order to be able to identify the maximum number of people with limited English proficiency. The Bilingual Education Act describes one group of individuals with non-English language backgrounds as those "who come from environments where a language other than English is dominant." This could be interpreted as persons in households in which the non-English language is the usual language. In the ELPS, about 58 percent of the children in households in which languages other than English are spoken lived in households in which the non-English language is the usual language. If the definition of non-English language background children were restricted to the children in these households, then two out of five children in language minority households--those in which some use is made of a non-English language--would be excluded. They, presumably, would not be tested for English proficiency and would not be considered for participation in programs which they need or from which they might benefit.

IV. ENGLISH-SPEAKING ABILITY AND ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY

The original definitions of language-minority children at risk focused on oral English skills -- speaking and understanding English. Many state laws continue to define the population with special needs as limited- or non-English speaking (LES/NES). Assessment instruments to place children in special programs or to remove them from programs frequently test only the oral skills. However, ability to speak and understand English is only a part of what it takes to succeed in school programs designed for English-speaking majority children. Language-minority children must

also acquire the reading and writing skills which become increasingly important in the upper grades, where achievement depends to a great extent upon ability to read and comprehend written material. The 1978 amendments to the Bilingual Education Act recognized these facts. They changed the definition of the population to be served by programs receiving assistance under the Act from children with limited-English speaking ability (LESA) to children with limited English proficiency (LEP), including proficiency in speaking, reading, writing and understanding English. They defined the domain in which the English skills must function as classrooms where the language of instruction is English.

The SIE and the CESS contained English-speaking ability rating questions. In the 1980 Census, a question on English-speaking ability was asked for those who spoke non-English languages at home. In addition to the fact that responses to these questions provide information on only one of the needed skills, there are other problems associated with the interpretation of responses for the purposes of estimating the size of the population in need. One member of the household usually reports for all the household members. Household respondents may themselves have language-minority backgrounds and an imperfect knowledge of English. They may be unable or unwilling to judge the English-speaking ability of other household members. They may have no way to gauge to what extent other household members are able to function in English in the workplace or elsewhere in the English-speaking community. While they may have observed the children in the household talking with siblings and playmates in English, they may have no basis for judging how well the children communicate in English in school.

Questions on English-speaking ability in the Census and the surveys directed toward meeting the mandate were intended as an aid in the identification of language-minority populations which probably have limited English proficiency. Combined with other information about them in the data bases, the responses to such

questions must be correlated with the results of objective testing of English proficiency to yield valid estimates of the size of the populations at risk. Used alone, responses to English-speaking ability rating questions greatly underestimate the number of children or adults who need special help to succeed in school or to fulfill their potential in the workplace or elsewhere in the wider English-speaking society.

Information from the CESS demonstrates this point. An essential part of the CESS was the devising of a test to measure the level of English proficiency which children need in a school setting. The resulting instrument was administered to language-minority children aged five to 14 in their homes in 1978. As a result of this process, the CESS found that there were about 2.4 million language minority children, aged five to 14, with limited English proficiency in the United States in 1978. There were an estimated 1.2 million children, aged 15 to 17, also with limited English proficiency, or 3.6 million in all in 1978, based upon the findings of the CESS. About two and a half million of these children lived in Spanish-speaking homes.

The results of the testing in the CESS were correlated with parents' ratings of their children's English-speaking ability. Of children aged five to 14 determined to have limited English proficiency, more than three quarters were rated by their parents as speaking English very well or well. These children would appear not to need special programs or services if only their parents' English-speaking ability ratings were used as indicators.

In the 1980 Census, respondents rated the English-speaking ability only of children who spoke non-English languages at home. They did not rate the ability of children who were reported only to speak English there, although. Judging from the results of the CESS, more than half of the children who usually or only speak English in language-minority homes also lack the essential skills in English needed to succeed in school. Of the children recorded in the 1980 Census who spoke

non-English languages in language-minority households. 635,000 were rated as not speaking English well or not speaking it at all. This figure is about 22 percent of the 2.9 million children who speak non-English languages at home who are estimated to have limited English proficiency when the findings of the CESS are applied to the 1980 Census counts. It is about 12 percent of the total of more than 5 million language-minority children with limited English proficiency, including those reported in the Census as only speaking English in language-minority homes in 1980.

Census data indicate that in 1980, about 452,000 children who spoke Spanish at home were rated as not speaking English well or not speaking it at all. There were about 1.9 million Spanish-speaking children in Spanish-speaking households estimated to have limited English proficiency in 1980 based upon the CESS, and a total of 2.8 million Spanish language-minority children with limited English proficiency in all in such households.

The test used in the CESS was administered to a sample of children identified in the 1980 Census in the English Language Proficiency Study (ELPS) in the summer of 1982. Preliminary findings from the ELPS indicate that in 1982 there were at least 2.7 million children, aged five to 14, with limited English proficiency in households in which non-English languages are usually or often spoken. Information is not yet available on how many children in this age group or in the total school-age population have limited English proficiency under the broader 1980 Census definition of non-English language background using the 1982 ELPS findings. The ELPS findings will replace the CESS findings as a basis for making estimates of the school-age population of language minority children with limited English proficiency. They will be applied to the 1980 Census to produce estimates for each state, metropolitan

area or smaller geographic area, such as a school district, and for a number of different language minority groups in addition to the Spanish language minority.

V. INTERPRETATION OF THE RESULTS OF ENGLISH-LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY TESTING

The estimates of the number of limited-English proficient language-minority children in the previous section reflect the interpretation of the results of the English-language proficiency testing as conceived in the CESS. They reflect the standard of achievement on the test used in the CESS. A different interpretation and a different standard would produce different estimates. In the CESS, the standard of achievement of English proficiency was the performance of a group of children identified by their schools as fluent English speakers who were progressing normally through the grades. Language-minority children who need special programs and services because of their language backgrounds and English proficiency are those who score lower on the test than fluent English-speaking children who are succeeding in school. This standard is reflected in the preliminary ELPS findings cited above.

In summer 1982, the ELPS administered the test to a cross-section of children in the United States, including a cross-section of children from English-language backgrounds. On the basis of this experience, the standard of achievement of English proficiency identifying children who need special programs and services will be re-examined. The scores separating limited-English proficient from non-limited-English proficient language-minority children will also be re-examined.

As we know from several recent studies of education in the United States, some English-speaking majority children are not progressing normally in school. Some of these children also lack some school-related English skills, although they do not require the same kinds of English instruction as language-minority children learning English as a second language. Averaging the scores of these children with

the scores of children who are succeeding in school would lower the required threshold of English proficiency. It would confound English proficiency related to a non-English language background with the English proficiency of language-majority children who are disadvantaged educationally for various reasons, mostly unrelated to language. It would set a standard, not of the proficiency needed for success in school, but of the proficiency needed to keep up with the least advantaged English language-majority children in U.S. schools.

A lowered threshold would reduce the numbers of language-minority children estimated to have special needs. It would mean that children at the upper ranges of limited English proficiency as previously measured might be denied the opportunity to participate in special programs and to achieve the levels of English proficiency needed to compete on a basis of equality with English-speaking majority peers. These children are also especially affected by the types of considerations examined in the following section.

VI. WHICH CHILDREN NEED BILINGUAL EDUCATION

Concepts of which children need particular programs and services in order to succeed in school and which children can benefit from particular programs and services also affect estimates of the number of language-minority children at risk. There are two principal concepts of which children need bilingual education programs based on their language characteristics. In one, all language-minority children with limited English proficiency are conceived as needing bilingual education. In the other, only limited-English proficient language-minority children who are in some way dependent on a language other than English are conceived to need bilingual education and to be able to benefit from it.

The Bilingual Education Act as originally written and as amended in 1974 and 1978 embodies the first concept. The Act defines its target group as children with

limited English proficiency, regardless of their individual language usage. It specifies that the language of the parents of the children will be considered the children's language. It goes further for American Indian and Alaskan Native children. In the Act, these children are candidates for programs assisted under the Act if a language other than English "has had a significant impact on their level of English language proficiency." The use of this concept accords with an increasing body of research knowledge suggesting that children must develop their home language skills first in order to be ready to learn in a second language.

The concept that only children who are in some way dependent on a language other than English need or can benefit from bilingual education derives from one of the original justifications for bilingual education. This concept held that children should be educated in their mother tongue on the basis that the mother tongue is their stronger language. If their stronger language appears to be English and not their mother tongue, it follows, according to this theory, that they will not benefit from the educational use of their mother tongue. This concept is embodied in the current Administration's effort to amend the Bilingual Education Act to give a funding priority to proposals from school districts intending to serve children whose usual language is other than English.

As indicated earlier, as of 1978, 3.6 million children met the definition contained in the Bilingual Education Act, according to the findings of the CESS. Use of the second concept, that only children whose usual language is a non-English language are in need of bilingual education programs and can benefit from them, would have reduced this number by more than half. Of the 2.4 million children aged five to 14 found to be limited in English proficency in the CESS, 1.3 million, or 56 percent, usually or only spoke English.

The 1980 Census does not contain information on the usual language of children and adults in the United States. The 1980 question asked whether individuals speak a language other than English at home or speak only English. About 4.6 million

children, or 56.2 percent of the 8.1 million children in homes in which non-English languages are spoken, speak their homes languages at home. The other children speak only English. Applying the CESS findings to this base, it is estimated that as many as 2 million children aged five to 17 who speak only English at home have limited English proficiency. Although they are required to assist these children according to the Lau decision, school districts would be discouraged from enrolling them in Bilingual Education Act programs if a funding priority were given to programs intending to serve children whose usual language is other than English.

A different concept of the need for bilingual education involves socio-economic status (SES). School achievement in the United States has often been found to be related to socioeconomic status. Children from homes with higher family incomes, where fathers occupy professional or managerial positions and parents are college-educated, are frequently found to fare better than children from homes without these conditions. Language-minority children are disproportionately those whose family incomes fall below the poverty level. Moreover, those children who speak the home language at home, especially if that language is Spanish, are much more likely than language-minority children who speak only English at home to be from poor families. Because of these associations of language characteristics and poverty, and because data on the English language proficiency of language-minority children has not been available, it is frequently asserted that SES and not language is the determining factor in the school failure of language-minority children. According to this concept, many language-minority children are at risk in U.S. schools, but they do not need bilingual education programs. Instead, they should be placed in remedial English programs, such as those designed for other economically disadvantaged children not achieving in school. In the 1980 Census, 7.1 million children, aged five to 17, lived in households in which the family income was below the poverty level. This was 15 percent of all children in this age group. About 1.3 million of these children

were from households in which languages other than English were spoken. They constituted 16.5 percent of the total of all children in such households. Nearly a million children speaking Spanish lived in Spanish-speaking households with family incomes below the poverty level. They constituted 31.4 percent of all children aged five to 17 who spoke Spanish and lived in Spanish-speaking households in 1980.

The ELPS findings will undoubtedly be used to study the relative effects on achievement of SES and of English proficiency and other language characteristics. Depending on the assumptions made and the design of the analyses, new questions may be raised about the need for bilingual education on the part of language-minority children from poor families.

Concepts of which children can benefit from bilingual education programs are broader in scope than the concepts of the children at risk. They include not only children who need to develop skills in their home languages prior to participating in school programs taught in English and children with well-developed home language skills and limited English proficiency, but also children who are already bilingual in the home language and English. They include children with English language backgrounds, including Blacks who, by developing second language skills -- in this case non-English language skills -- in the early grades, can contribute to fulfilling the nation's need for people with foreign language skills and knowledge. Moreover, English-language background children who are not achieving in school may improve their English language skills through the study of a second language. In integrated classes, English-language background children can assist their language-minority classmates to acquire English while they receive similar help with the second language. Bilingual language-minority children and English-speaking majority children are outside the populations at risk. They possess sufficient English to succeed in English-medium school programs without special help. The present Bilingual Education Act permits up to 40 percent

of the enrollment in programs supported by the Act to consist of such children. Amendments introduced in 1984 would permit programs with the specific goal of developing language skills both in English and another language.

VII. CONCLUSIONS

Studies of language-minority children demonstrate that language background and usage are imperfectly related to English language proficiency. While children who speak their home languages may be especially likely to be limited in their English skills, children who usually or only speak English in language-minority homes may also lack the essential skills in English to succeed in school programs offered only in English. To assure that the needs of all limited-English proficient language-minority children are met, definitions which are not restricted by concepts of language dominance or usage, and methods of identification which are not limited to the examination of English-speaking skills must be used. The Lau decision requires that the needs of all limited-English proficient children must be met, regardless of the remedy chosen.

The English Language Proficiency Study in summer 1982 offers a new and powerful tool to update the estimates of the number of language-minority children with limited English proficiency. Findings can be applied to the information on language-minority children in the 1980 Census to produce estimates of the size of the population at risk for each state and metropolitan area and even for each school district. The ELPS findings can be used to produce estimates of the number of children at risk from a number of language-minority backgrounds in addition to Spanish. These efforts must embody broad definitions and concepts of need to assure that all children with language-related needs have an equal opportunity. They must employ a standard of English proficiency high enough to assure that language-minority

children can compete on an equal basis with their successful English-speaking majority classmates. The estimates are only estimates but the children they represent are real children with real futures to fulfill.

VIII. SOURCES OF ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Information on language minorities in decennial censuses prior to 1980 is contained in Dorothy Waggoner, "Statistics on Language Use" in Charles A. Ferguson and Shirley Brice Heath, editors, Language in the U.S.A. (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1981, pp. 486-515). The Survey of Income and Education results were published in two bulletins from the National Center for Education Statistics, "Geographic Distribution, Nativity, and Age Distribution of Language Minorities in the United States: Spring 1976" and "Place of Birth and Language Characteristics of Persons of Hispanic Origin in the United States, Spring 1976." They are available in the ERIC system and through the National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education (1555 Wilson Boulevard, Rosslyn, Virginia 22209). Findings from the CESS are available in J. Michael O'Malley, Children's English and Services Study. Language Minority Children with Limited English Proficiency in the United States (Rosslyn, Virginia: National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education, 1981). The estimates of the size of the language minority population from the 1980 Census contained in this article are found in the U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1980 Census of Population, Volume 1, Characteristics of the Population, Chapter D, Detailed Population Characteristics, Part 1, U.S. Summary (PC80-1-D1) (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1984). Waggoner, "The Need for Bilingual Education: Estimates from the 1980 Census" (NABE Journal, VIII(2), pp. 1-14) contains additional information on the use of the 1980 Census to produce estimates of the number of limited-English proficient language-minority children in the United States. The

preliminary estimates of the number of language minority children with limited English proficiency, aged five to 14, from the ELPS are found in the National Center for Education Statistics' The Condition of Education, 1984 Edition (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1984). Comments on the politicization of the counts may be found in Wagoner, "Numbers and Needs: Estimating Bilingual Education Populations," in Stanley S. Seidner, editor, Issues of Language Assessment, Volume II: Language Assessment and Curriculum Planning (Springfield, Illinois: Illinois State Board of Education, 1983, pp. 215-218).